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AUTHOR Leith, Ian
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the problems found by both professional and amateur users of archives and libraries who need to be able to phrase specific questions in conventional and online forms. It discusses issues within the context of a national archive holding over ten million photographs and is concerned with the varying roles of not only those individuals who produced images, but also their archival histories. The exploration and interpretation of the lineage of all image producers indicates the need not only to look at the original intentions of photographers, but also at their increasing biographical obscurity--without these two facets, photographs are in danger of becoming digital fodder without any history of their own. (Author/MES)

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How to formulate the photographic question: a context for architectural and topographical photographs in England

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Ian Leith
National Monuments Record, English Heritage
Swindon, UK
E-mail: ian.leith@rchme.co.uk

Abstract:

This paper provides an overview of the problems found by both professional and amateur users of archives and libraries who need to be able to phrase specific questions in conventional and online forms. It discusses issues within the context of a national archive holding over 10 million photographs and is concerned with the varying roles of not only those individuals who produced images but also their archival histories. The exploration and interpretation of the lineage of all image producers indicates the need not only to look at the original intentions of photographers but also at their increasing biographical obscurity: without these two facets photographs are in danger of becoming digital fodder without any history of their own.

I feel that I am very appropriately speaking to you but I could equally be speaking to a conference of Archivists or Curators or Architectural Historians or Historians of Photography. If one defines an Archivist as being one who is mainly concerned with written records then I am none of these - yet they all impinge. Perhaps the best term is Visual Archivist - but these senses by which we define Archivist are important to my argument which is that many of those responsible for visual records cannot see. The alternative and shorter title here might be The Invisibility of Images. I deal with any visual image, usually photographic but including some drawn or measured plans which relate to the remit of a national heritage organization, English

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Heritage, which is concerned with all aspects of the historic environment: breadth as well as access to specialised research resources are necessary to encompass this.

These may be blunt and generalized statements which almost certainly require qualification or even correction: I know they do not even universally apply in England quite apart from the USA – but I am equally sure that in the USA photography has much more established and respectable academic credentials and, more importantly, much bigger set of professionals whose concern is purely photographic. In England such expertise devolves to Librarians, Curators and Archivists whose main concerns relate to a whole range of media: objects, written or printed material, fine art…yet at the same time they are also the people responsible for as yet largely ill-defined photographic collections. My concern is that insufficient interdisciplinary training means that the most prevalent visual medium for the last 150 years is the very medium which is given the least resources for our successors to interpret. It is of course impossible to suggest that every single image and photographer could be defined in some hypothetical Doomsday Book: selectivity is absolutely essential yet there would appear to be an inexplicably vast difference between the application of full cataloguing and the creation of simple handlists of photographic holdings. In England no bibliography of collections or photographers exists beyond now out of date sources. The creation of a simple database mainly relating to photography can begin to allow a contextual overview for an heretofore absent or hidden facet of visual interpretation: the reclamation of role and the interplay between such roles in photography and associated areas.

This data relates to non-photographic as well as purely photographic data: in a national heritage context it is necessary to broaden data to include associated roles: that is, architects, designers, engravers, draughtsmen, etc. Furthermore in a very large archive it is also desirable to make entries for anticipated holdings even where no example is known since even if no actual examples are ever found this data will still provide a context: it relates to the understanding of the archive. This Signposting function is vital not only to interpret the collection in question but also to aid those users who need to know where else to go. No large collection exists in isolation.

The simple database is only a tool to allow manoeuvring within many other highly specialized retrieval aids - it does not attempt to replace sophisticated catalogues whether in digital or conventional form. It is perhaps high-level metadata which allows a multiplicity of functions – and is perhaps applicable to the complex world within which we operate. I am a generalist within a large institution of specialists – I know where one might find an expert and can aid assessment processes whereby one gains a quick overview of whether that institution holds any material: this informs acquisition, documentation [including copyright] and indeed deaccession processes.

The core of most architectural photographic archives relates to four factors: Fame or Date or Event or Place. Thus much image retrieval relates to the earliest known image, the fame of a person or designer, the associated events and with the topographical location. Most collections are only accessible by a simple location systems. Furthermore any biographical retrieval is entirely dependent on the fame of the photographer – within the vast field of architectural and topographical photography of course only a few are famous practitioners. The absence of adequate retrieval aids to ordinary architects or designers and to the many sites which are not endowed with a famous event is compounded by a very selective set of known biographical sources for photographers.

Thus the natural bias in archives is towards those items associated with Fame and Event but it is also to avoiding 'impure' processes such as mechanical photographic processes like postcards. I do not know of the development of US research but in the UK postcard collecting tends to preclude the study of roles and be biased in favour of the subject. Similarly the definition of printing history tends towards 'art' processes or line illustrations even though the same companies often also produced postcards and other 'impure' mechanical processes. We need to be aware of the convergence of several strands of study if we are to understand the broad nature of "views" held by a large archive: this means that the history of photography is complemented by all aspects of printing history and some familiarity with private collecting pursuits.

Photographic archives can include a continuum of expertise from the professional to the amateur and curators need to be able to embrace the same continuum: much of the visual data is mundane but that does not mean that there should be less attention paid to "merely" amateur or commercial production: too much concentration on professional fame can lead to an imbalance: in one town the well-known professional photographer we can now see to be eclipsed by an amateur with vision whose negatives no longer survive.

Thus a Seamless approach is required: one which looks not only at the history of photography but also at the associated histories of related subjects or themes. Unlike the USA, photography in England has not attained the same status in society. Collectors are few and institutions ability to focus on it is narrow – early history, famous practitioners etc. This absence of perceived status exists despite the existence of huge hunger for visual resources which are however largely inaccessible and often cannot be properly interpreted.

This paper suggest that at least in the UK there is a need for photographic data and interpretation, that such data is not available through most libraries and archives.It is predicated on experience with the architectural holdings of a national archive: the National Monuments Record [NMR] is the public archive of English Heritage the principal governmental agency responsible for many facets of the historic environment - the United States equivalent might be the combination of the US Park Service plus Historic American Buildings Survey plus some state archival functions relating to the maintenance, conservation and interpretation of archaeological sites, historic buildings and landscape.

When I say that there is no photo data that can be fed into the heritage knowledge base I overstate: obviously such resources do exist but my point here is that the access to and availability of the very photographic tools which can aid heritage interpretation themselves require interpretation, development and funding. So one of the main points here is to bring to attention how one would go about trying to pinpoint and locate data and to alert librarians about how with limited resources one might begin to tackle the problem of making accessible images which lurk in the basement – yet another alternative title might be The Archival Iceberg: Tackling the Submerged Nine-Tenths. Now, of course you here in dynamic America may not have this bulky backlog of sheer information; perhaps England like Italy is overburdened with history – but I suspect I am describing an internal tendency for photography to fall into the sphere of archivists and librarians, who, unless their institution is mainly concerned with 'modern' images, find that photo collections fare less well in the funding and prioritisation stakes. I am

suggesting that the efforts required to store, interpret and make available the traditional archival media [documents etc] mean that photography is not accorded, at least in England, the proper intellectual scrutiny. I also suggest that indiscriminate application of digital solutions may actually reduce further our ability to interpret the past. However, the internet dissemination of high-level descriptions of photo collections by providing a context to local and national holdings, is I suggest, a better application of technology. This would allow a context for appropriate digitisation programmes.

As you may have guessed I am talking here about our common enemy: overlap and duplication. Perhaps we are also creating another enemy: complication. The problems even with conventional photographic media are legion but the long-term effect of over-layering yet another seductively simple access to the visual world – digitisation – has the same effect on me as Nicholson Baker's comments on, what in America can only be called, the conspiracy to get rid of index cards. Even if digitisation of images includes all conventional indexes daybooks and captioning [which is a doubtful premiss] we keepers of knowledge will be confronted by several future worries:

One: Are we able to keep re-investing in equipment to re-write and maintain what is in effect a sexy but short-term set of our 'best' collections or images?
Two: Are we assuming all conventional photographs will be digitised? If so I would be glad to hear more from by technical and business colleagues regarding this which must be the mother of all those metaphysical things called the 'Modern Project' – or is this total digital capturing actually quite simple if sufficient resources are applied? Three: If only a selection of images are to be digitised such an invidious process raises a whole set of further questions: Who selects? Who selects the selectors? What are the criteria? To what degree is original provenance and caption included with a digitised image? What is the long-term effect of partial digitising on the remaining uncaptured rump of conventional materials? We already have a residue in our basements of that which for various reasons was not considered important enough to print: will this material be catalogued and digitised?

These questions arise from curating and making available very large conventional photo collections and certainly do not apply to small or medium-sized holdings where I would be inclined to digitise every last scrap: every unidentified fuzzy duplicate remnant along with every piece of documentation can quite easily be captured and has to be captured – for if you do not, who is going to curate what can only be described as the closest thing to archival garbage? By this I mean the discarded appendix of a collection where decisions have been made regarding the relevant content.

Being archives we are well aware that designating material as secondary or as garbage is dangerously subjective and that a later generation [or, if one has worked in an archive for a long time, a wiser version of oneself] our successors may well find such scraps worthy of subsequent re-appraisal. So, going back to the problem of larger collections I would argue that sheer size begets humility: certain ARCHIVAL LAWS can perhaps be propounded:

1. Eternal Recurrence: Nietzsche's concept is alive and well – all things will archivally re-occur, all criteria, all questions and enquiries will inevitably reappear again.

2. Garbage Theory applies: low-priority collections and material for de-accessioning are precisely that part of any collection requiring attention.

3. KISS: Keep it Simple Stupid. Complexity and multiplication of data is endemic: users need a simple overview of holdings whether in conventional or digital form.

4. Input Now – how many staff in your institution are encouraged to add new data as it passes before them or whose duty specifically relates to noting the existence or the upgrading of data as it is used?

5. Make 'Virtual Accessions': Pre-emptively enter data: it is quite possible [if not soon desirable] to create entries which will mean that contextual data can be anticipated whether or not you actually hold the item in question.

6. Entropy Management Is Our Business: we need the sort of depth and vision used by astronomers to adequately navigate though our mini-universes.

Many planets and stars are better defined than our own storage spaces.

7. Documentation and Reference Sources are Your Gods - but God Does Not

Exist. That is now two Nietzschean references – he is obviously the philosopher for Photographic Archivists or Curators.

Thus the proposition is that a simple contextual overview of all holdings, all roles can be created. That this will feed the constant desire for the prioritisation necessary for digitisation, cataloguing and conservation – and , indeed, for acquisitions and the little matter of copyright. This simple database means that links across a wide variety of associated heritage fields can be made, that the beginnings of national and even international knowledge of creators or roles is possible. To be viable any photographic archive has to be able to internally navigate through its holdings if it is to properly perform its archival role: such a contextual knowledge allows photography to enter and interact with the much better defined cultural and material worlds and enable us to see whole.

[This paper is based on an essay in the **London Topographical Record** 2001 entitled "Amateurs, Antiquarians and Tradesmen: A Context for Photographic History in London" where there is more detail regarding some of these issues]

Ian Leith
English Heritage
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